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SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN ESTONIA AND LATVIA

Letter dated 23 November 1993 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I should like to draw your attention to a question which is high among the priorities of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation - that of the situation of the Russian-speaking population in States established within the territory of the former USSR, especially in Estonia and Latvia.

The Russian Federation is making a sincere effort to develop friendly and mutually advantageous relations with Estonia and Latvia, and is interested in maintaining and strengthening good-neighbourliness with them. This is borne out by a number of serious compromise steps which we took recently in connection with another important issue, namely the withdrawal of troops, and declared our readiness to complete the withdrawal by 31 August 1994.

The Russian leadership has repeatedly drawn the attention of the United Nations and other international organizations to the intolerable situation relating to the protection of the rights and interests of ethnic Russians in those two Baltic countries. In essence, as in the past, velvet-gloved "ethnic cleansing" is being put into practice there in the guise of the false slogan of restoring "historical justice".

From the beginning of this year alone, the Estonian authorities have adopted a whole series of legislative and administrative acts which, contrary to the recommendations of international experts, have truly worsened the situation of a significant proportion of the population. In specific terms, they involve laws pertaining to foreigners and to elementary and secondary schools, and decisions adopted by the Tartu and Tallinn municipal councils. There is the unconcealed intention to set in motion a mechanism for deporting war veterans. A recent glaring example of this occurred when a whole group of such veterans in the Estonian town of Viljandi were deprived of their residence permits.

In Latvia, the local authorities are in essence already resorting to deportation. According to press reports, the Department of Citizenship and Immigration has drawn up about 1,000 deportation orders - "instructions" to leave Latvia within seven days without the right to re-enter the country. No law on citizenship has yet been adopted, and as a result, officials in many cases continue to treat applications by Russian-speaking inhabitants in an arbitrary fashion. The draft of such a law adopted au a basis for consideration in Parliament provides for naturalization on the basis of annual quotas; however, these would apply not to persons entering the country but to its permanent residents, including those who were born in Latvia and have lived there for decades. A law on municipal elections now being drafted would deprive more than one third of the permanent residents of the country of their rights of suffrage. In other words, it goes even farther than a similar, and far from ideal, law in the Republic of Estonia.

Our heightened attention to the problems of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia and Latvia is not a manifestation of some tendentious attitude towards these two countries. In their conclusions and recommendations, missions sent there by the United Nations, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe and human rights organizations have confirmed the grounds for our concern. Unfortunately, in Estonia and Latvia these recommendations are to a large extent ignored, and at times there is a complete silence. The measures taken to implement them are as a rule purely cosmetic in nature.

In these circumstances the Russian Federation considers that the United Nations and other international organizations must not remain indifferent to the unfolding situation in the field of human rights in Estonia and Latvia.

By continuing to consider this question, the United Nations might assist in creating in those countries a climate of national consensus and civil peace, and in building genuinely democratic States founded on the rule of law.

Of course, we are aware of the existence of other problems in our mutual relations with Estonia and Latvia arising from a whole range of historical circumstances.

In our view, however, these must not overshadow the main issue - the need to protect the Russian-speaking inhabitants of Estonia and Latvia from political, social and police tyranny. The mandate of the United Nations in the humanitarian field must continue to be utilized to the fullest extent.

We know, of course, about the efforts being undertaken by the international community, especially the United Nations, to that end. We feel that a serious approach is being taken to this problem: consequently, some progress has been discerned but, regrettably, there have also been relapses in the resolution of issues affecting the lawful rights and interests of the Russian-speaking inhabitants of Estonia and Latvia.

In a word, it is necessary to continue to follow closely the evolving situation with respect to human rights in Estonia and Latvia, and we are deeply convinced that the United Nations is called upon to play a leading role in this

matter. That is why we consider it necessary to retain the item entitled "Situation of human rights in Estonia and Latvia" on the agenda of the General Assembly.

I request you to have this letter distributed urgently as a document of the General Assembly under agenda item 115.

(Signed) Y. VORONTSOV